



The Role of Ward Platforms in Market Development: The Experiences of Samriddhi Project



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BANGLADESH

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Time of
publication

December 2014

Published by

SDC-Samriddhi project
HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation Bangladesh

Copies available at

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Samriddhi
enhancing rural prosperity through
market systems development in Bangladesh

December 2014

Acknowledgement

Capitalizing the Samriddhi project experiences about the Ward Platforms opens deeper look at best practices and draws lessons for future interventions. The market development approach of the project showed necessity of the Ward Platforms with a clear vision that combines both social and economic interests of all stakeholders.

This document would not be possible without the tremendous support from the Samriddhi project team. We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to Humayun Kabir for contributing to the design of the study and support in the data analysis, Sultan Mahmud for finalising the layout, as well as the Regional Offices of Samriddhi in Rajshahi, Bogra, Rangpur and Sunamganj.

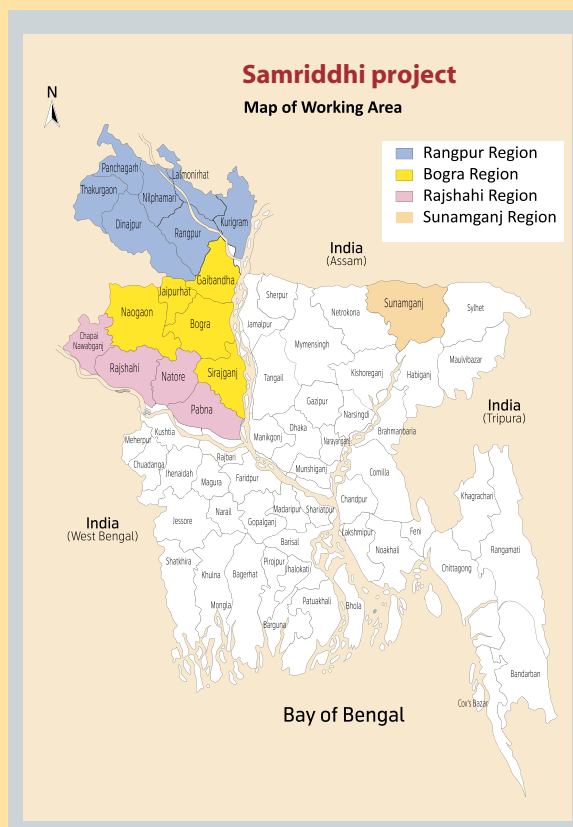


Figure-1: Samriddhi working area

We also acknowledge the support and constructive feedback from HELVETAS country office members and in particular Shamim Ahamed, Zenebe Uraguchi as well as field officers of the Sharique project. Last but not least, big thanks to the Service Providers' Associations (SPAs), the Union Parishads, the Ward Platform leaders and farmers for their valuable time and open discussions.

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Acronyms

APO	Annual Plan of Operation
BDT	Bangladeshi Taka (currency)
BMC	Business Management Committee
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CCE	Climate Change Effect
CP	Cluster/Community Platform
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
DAE	Department of Agricultural Extension, GoB
DLS	Department of Livestock Services, GoB
EC	Executive Committee
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FM	Female Mentor
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
HSI	HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation
HID	Human & Institutional Development
IGA	Income Generating Activity
Khas land	Public land (i.e. Government land, landless have right to access)
LEAF	Livelihoods, Empowerment and Agroforestry
LSP	Local Service Provider
MSE	Micro and Small Enterprise
MSE Nets	Micro and Small Enterprise Networks
MFI	Micro Finance Institute
M4P	Making Market Work for the Poor
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
PEP	Poor & Extreme Poor
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SAAKTI	Sustainable Access to Agro-forestry Knowledge, Technology & Information
SPA	Service Providers' Association
SC	Service Centre
UDMC	Union Disaster Management Committee
Union	Lowest administrative tier of Local Government of Bangladesh
UP	Union Parishad
UZ	Upazilla (Sub-district)
VCD	Value Chain Development
VC	Value Chain
Ward	Sub-Union, 9 Wards comprise one Union
WEE	Women's Economic Empowerment
WP	Ward Platform
WDB	Water Development Board

Executive Summary

Market systems are arrangements involving a range of actors and a variety of activities in different sectors, which operate and are conducted within a wider set of institutions, rules, infrastructure and supporting functions. The institutions, which are the “rules of the game”, influence individuals’ behaviour. The institutions, including markets, are composed of economic and non-economic actors whose behaviours can be corrected, because they are based on the sets of particular formal or informal rules.

In facilitating market system development, the Samriddhi, a multi-year project of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, contributed to addressing the root causes of the market under performance or failure. The project facilitators tried to understand market systems by looking into the social and political contexts as well as the economic profile of the target group and other actors and the expected poverty reduction impact.

This document discusses the experiences of Samriddhi in using social capital for changing or improving the market systems. They provide important lessons on how communities can play crucial roles in ensuring the meaningful participation of the poor and extreme poor. The study also points out few pitfalls in regard to community mobilisation, particularly in cases where community platforms lack committed leaders as well as where external interventions lack a clear vision of enabling/facilitating local institutions to own the systems.

Ward Platforms (WPs) are development “catalysts” at Ward level that aim at creating a local enabling environment for social, economic development and good governance. The WPs evolved in the course of a long development process initiated through the formation of Clusters or Community Platforms. They sought to respond to the social needs of communities and helped to strengthen the advocacy and lobbying power of the communities to get access to various social benefits.

The role of the Ward Platforms was not limited to lobbying and advocacy, but also to ensure inclusion of the poor and extreme poor, to empower women in economic activities, and to support disaster risk management initiatives. Several cases from the field shared in this document show how Ward Platforms improved economic and social life of the communities by involving them in economic activities and building social capital through common interests.

However, not all Ward Platforms, and local government bodies for that matter, owned the system, and therefore did not develop further. On the one hand, the WPs lacked committed leaders and incentives for the various stakeholders, and on the other hand, the project lacked a clear strategic vision to sustain such Platforms. The main lesson drawn from this document is the importance of social mobilisation as a pre-requisite for any pro-poor market system development, which however needs to be based on a clear vision, incentives and capacities of the involved actors and stakeholders. Moreover, the integration of the social needs into commercial activities emerges as a challenge for sustainable development.

At the end, the document outlines recommendations based on the Samriddhi experiences that help to prevent pitfalls of social mobilisation and provides some considerations for a successful market system development approach. The main recommendations relate to the need of:

- Integrating the social capital into market development as a key to success
- Strengthening advocacy for a better enabling environment
- Enhancing women participation as drivers of social capital building
- Ensuring equal shares and benefits for all involved through mutual collaboration



1. Introduction

This study is about the role of the Samriddhi project in facilitating market systems changes or improvements by tapping into social capital. It is based on the experiences in Bangladesh focusing on facilitating inclusive and sustainable market systems. The discussions provide an overview of how the values, priorities and demands of communities influence understanding and improving market systems.

In the context of fragile economic and political institutions, the poor and extreme poor become highly vulnerable. The experiences of the Samriddhi project in similar context offer important lessons on how communities can play crucial roles in ensuring the meaningful participation of the poor and extreme poor. The study also points out the pitfalls of community mobilisation, particularly in cases where projects lack a clear vision of enabling/facilitating local institutions to own the systems.

The issues discussed in this study are by no means new, they have been the subject of intense debate between proponents of “market economy” and “market society” for long. The story begins in the discourse between Adam Smith, the father of modern economics, and Karl Polyani, an economic historian. Smith is well known for his work on *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). The main message of his work was that self-interest through demand and supply is the driving force for prosperity of societies. This “invisible hand” is the source of competition and innovation that has been the foundation of the free market economy. In *The Great Transformation* (1944), Polyani emphasized the market economy was created based on a market society. The expansion of the market economy transformed societies by changing institutions and people’s behaviour.

The central point that can be extracted from the two great works of Smith and Polyani is not whether market systems are important to the lives of people (through creating wealth and hence addressing poverty). Market systems are institutions, which are the “rules of the game”, that influence individuals’ behaviour. However, the focus on markets in this document does not exclusively focus on markets in the economic sense, i.e. engaging and working with only private sector actors and enterprises. Institutions including markets are composed of economic, political and social actors whose behaviours can be corrected, because they are based on sets of particular formal or informal rules. Development aid can be used to facilitate market system changes or improvements to enhance the participation and benefits of the poor and disadvantaged people. In facilitating market system development, the project facilitators tried to understand market systems by looking into the social and political contexts as well as the economic profile of the target group and the expected poverty reduction impact on that target group.

This document presents some concrete examples – good practices and challenges – and discusses the experiences of the Samridhi project in using social capital for changing or improving market systems. Social capital is defined as social networks ("networks of civic engagement") and associated norms that have an effect on the wellbeing of community members. The document presents how social capital contributes to coordination and cooperation for the mutual benefits of community members, thereby affecting the rate and pattern of economic development. This is also documented how the social and political environment that enables cooperation to develop and shapes economic performance.

The specific objectives of the study are:

- Draw the knowledge and experiences, document best practices and challenges, and consolidate lessons learnt;
- Make recommendations so as to enhance the role of social capital in market systems development to address poverty;
- Based on the above, to strategically position the experiences and knowledge for creating organisational retrievable knowledge in HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation (Bangladesh) by making the key findings and learning process to a wide range of stakeholders.



2. Background of Community Mobilisation

2.1 Pitfalls/barriers of community mobilisation:

Lack of financial incentives of the community leaders/organisers: Usually, the social mobilisation takes place through awareness increase and engaging a group of people as well as mobilising them based on the common interests and issues. In most cases, the success is reached if there is a “devoted social leader” and ultimate passionate driver to deliver results for the community people. There are few exceptions when the community mobilisation takes place through informal social institutions often without any financial capital. In the case of the Samrid-dhi project, the WP leaders did not have financial incentives and lacked capacities to deal with the social issues.

Gender and social inequality in the community: As leaders are the key drivers to move the communities forward, it is important to note that they shall represent all community members. However, in some societies the leaders tend to be closer to wealthier and/or more politically influential people that leads to the game of “power relations”. In such cases, the poor might be bypassed or excluded that might hinder any community mobilisation. It is not possible to ensure equality in the community when the poor are excluded.

Accordingly, the socio-cultural practices hinder the participation of women in development activities. Around 50%¹ of the population in Bangladesh are women. Most of them are out of the mainstream in development because their positions are discriminated and unequally treated at social and political levels. In a result, the women issues are ignored and kept deliberately out of the development initiatives in general. Although a number of development agencies are working to break through the gender inequality, still it remains as a key issue. The Samriddhi project introduced pro-women value chains (cotton craft, medicinal plant) that contributed to improvement of social and economic livelihood of women.

Inherited conflicts/rivalry among different social groups: In rural areas of Bangladesh, there are informal social groups (or so called “Samaj”² groups) that are difficult to mobilise and raise common issues in the community. These groups operate within their own community, often covering one village (“para”) and hardly integrate with another Samaj group. Often, such relations tend to have certain extent of rivalry, which might be inherited from the past through the generations. Nowadays, due to urbanisation these groups eventually lose their power and influence. With introduction of the Ward Platforms the Samriddhi project ensured an equal participation of community members and balanced power relations by electing the leaders from several villages /paras.

¹ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>- World Fact Book, est. 2014

² Samaj is a social group in rural areas led by powerful leaders, having their common interests or beliefs. Religion, race, income level or family relations do not define the Samaj groups.

2.2 Samriddhi approach in community mobilisation

The Ward Platforms have gone through a long evolutionary period over the years. In 2004 the Livelihoods, Empowerment and Agroforestry project (LEAF) promoted Community Based Organisations (CBO), a group of people with the objective to address social and economic issues. Later, three to five CBOs were united into a larger group called Cluster Platforms. The Cluster Platforms (CPs) were formed to jointly solve the social and economic issues and allow horizontal learning among CBOs. The Cluster Platforms supported better access to services and resources, particularly for poor and extreme poor people.

In 2010 the Samriddhi project renamed the Cluster Platform into Community Platforms (CPs) with the view to facilitate the empowerment of community people by inclusion of all categories from different segments of the community such as elites, teachers, civil societies, poor and extreme poor people, women and member of local government bodies as representatives of the CP. The CPs functioned at the level of a Ward of Union Parishad (UP). Later, the CPs were renamed as Ward Platforms (WPs) with the aim to strengthen communities' capacities by establishing functional linkages with the UP and other development organisations.

The WPs established their committees with the representatives from each CBOs. In the context of Bangladesh, the "Ward" is a small development unit below the lowest tier of the local government or Union Parishad (UP). One UP consists of nine ward representatives that are elected through citizen's votes and has legal mandates to provide public services and resources for the whole community people in the Ward.

The WPs identified their development priorities through elaborating Annual Plan of Operation (APO) mentioning in different technical, social and economic activities. In the frame of economic activities, the CBOs were gradually involved in "Income Generating Activities (IGA)" using own savings or sometimes using loans from Micro Finance Institutes (MFI) as a start-up capital. The CBOs had their own leaders who were accepted by other members within the group.

Key features of Ward Platforms

- No formal structure (no registration)
- No contradiction with the legal government structures – working and engaging in official procedures as e.g. Union Parishads' (UPs) planning and budgeting
- Represents all paras / villages and is open for all interest groups of the ward concerned
- Is inclusive with citizens from all strata (focus on poor and marginalised groups)



The LEAF project mainly facilitated the CBO leaders to implement their livelihoods improvement priorities. The Sustainable Access to Agro-forestry Knowledge, Technology and Information project (SAAKTI) was launched in parallel with LEAF project to meet the demands of farmers. SAAKTI supported the capacities of Local Service Providers (LSP) and their associations, the Service Providers' Associations (SPA), through linking them to public and private actors. In other words, the roles of LEAF and SAAKTI projects were mainly to coordinate the “demand and supply” of farmers and the service providers.

The WPs played a vital role in promoting gender equality. The WPs used Community Facilitators (CF) and Female Mentors (FM) to undertake their functions. They used some tools like Participatory Gender Analysis (PGA) tools³ to address gender disparity by supporting farmers to identify problems and roles, and prepare gender related action plans. Through the counselling function of FMs, the family related issues (e.g. high costs for dowry, early marriage) were resolved. Overall participation of women in decision-making process has increased at community level.

The Samriddhi project promoted WPs that involved all households of a ward (sub-union). The WPs were capable of influencing the “elected ward member” of the UP to get access to services like safety net allowances, sanitation materials, resource mobilisation and create employment for the poor people in different IGAs. The Samriddhi project facilitated to increase the capacities of the WPs in three areas: 1) Human and Institutional Development (HID), 2) Gender and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and 3) Making Market works for the poor (M4P). Altogether, 1899 Ward Platforms were involved since 2004 in the frame of LEAF, SAAKTI and Samriddhi projects. See Figure 2.

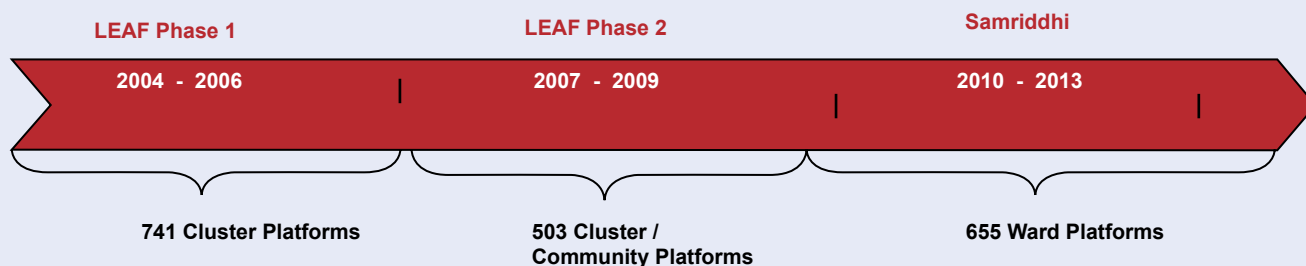


Figure 2: Development of Platforms

Although the WPs are no longer supported by the Samriddhi project since 2013, the “social mobilisation” can be used as an entry point to build economic and social institutions for addressing constraints that communities faced. This document also presents a way forward to ensure sustainability and scale.

³ PGA tool (Participatory Gender Analysis), a pictorial self-assessment of the gender inequality followed by the planning of actions for improvement in a participatory way. Developed by Samriddhi team in 2011. Available in project archives.

3. Roles and Functions of the Ward Platforms

The capable WPs provided an important avenue to communities to advance their interests and priorities in the areas of access to markets, skills development and health care. They served as an important source of voice for the poor and disadvantaged people. WPs created favourable enabling environment at community levels so that inclusive market actors, such as producers' groups emerged and further grew. This included ensuring security (e.g. producers' investment), voice, guarantees, representation and additional support to communities. Without the support and activities of the WPs, the formation of producers by local service producers would be hindered, and existing groups would not be able to carry out some of their business activities.

3.1. Inclusion of the poor & extreme poor

An important indicator in strengthening the WPs was their ability to manage functional relationships with other development partners and stakeholders like the UPs, government line agencies, micro finance institutions and non-government organisations. The collaboration with development partners intensified and WPs started to implement joint initiatives with UPs (e.g national and international days of observation, awareness raising campaigns, road construction monitoring, roadside tree plantation and other). The implementation of these activities had strong implication on the capacity building of WPs: it enabled the WPs to raise local resources to implement their development plans related to skills improvement (including production related skills), health care, DRR and other social activities. Such initiatives helped WPs to respond timely to community needs and economic issues particularly for the poor and extreme poor.

Selection of the value chains in economic activities were based on the criteria of inclusiveness of the poor and extreme poor. It also focused on the growth market potential for the respective value chains. Based on the analysis of the different value chains, it became evident that four value chains like medicinal plants, duck, chicken and vegetables contributed to high inclusiveness and growth criteria. Other four value chains like cotton, jute, plant craft and goat were characterized by high inclusiveness of poor but low growth potentials. The remaining four value chains like bull fattening, fruit, dairy and fish showed high growth and low inclusiveness.⁴



⁴ Reference: Samriddhi Semester Report for 2012, P- 44

The WPs had significant role in inclusion of poor and extreme poor people in value chains development, particularly in value chains where initial investment costs were needed like in dairy, bull fattening and fish. The WPs acted as guarantor for the poor by negotiating a loan (cash and/or in kind) from financial institutes like MFIs, banks or traders. Some traders provided advance loan (cash /inputs) to the poor and extreme poor in duck, bull, crafts and fruits value chains.

With the support from the WPs, the poor and extreme poor had access to government services from the UPs. The WPs facilitated the ward allocation of safety net allowances like cash for work schemes for the poor and extreme poor that created job opportunities in the community.

The WPs facilitated to improve the capacities of the poor and extreme poor by linking them for life skill training offered by UPs, SPAs, line agencies and the private sector. These skill trainings were disseminated either by providing the training directly to the poor (in fruits, chicken, bull fattening value chains) or through Community Facilitators⁵. The trainings were about improved quality or improved design in crafts as well as production and processing of medicinal plants. These initiatives also helped WPs to advocate for the rights of the poor and extreme poor to obtain services from different government agencies and private sector organisations.

The WPs acted as a social security of the poor producers in medicinal plant cultivation in village road-side areas. This included protection of plants (medicinal herbs and vegetables) from being destroyed or stolen as well as tree plantation and fodder cultivation on government owned roadside land.



"The arbitration role of the Ward Platforms saved our 2 km medicinal plants from destruction by the local neighbours. Today, everybody in the village understands that roadside plantation provides an important additional income for poor women."

– Hosniara Begum Koli, President of Medicinal plant MSE group, Madhya Ramchandrapur Village, Hossainpur UP, Polashbari Upazilla, Gaibandha District

⁵ DAE/DLS organised TOT for Community Facilitators to further transfer the skills to farmers.

Inclusion of the poor and extreme poor in income and employment opportunities was strengthened through the coordination between WPs and producers groups or Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs). Various business relations could be established between the local entrepreneurs and poor producers. The most common practice was “share crop system” for agricultural activities and wages in the garments sector. For instance, a wealthier owner-producer provided a cow for milk and beef purpose, pond for fish, land for vegetables based on share crop system or a well-off entrepreneur sub-contracts the producer for garment work based on a wage system.

Case 1: Inclusion of women in economic activities

I am Smrity Begum and I am 20 years old. I live with my father, 5 sisters and 1 brother. We live in a small house in Kangal Para village of Botlagari Union under Syedpur Upazila of Nilphamari district. I am the eldest child in the family. My father is the only one who works and provides the family with food and education. The older we get the more expenses occur, and my father was not able to cover all expenses. I felt responsible for the family and started looking for any job in the village. One day my friend told me about the WP that organises work for women in sewing/cloth making. I joined the meeting organised by the WP, and later they arranged a training for us. I was inspired by such initiatives and learned very quickly. After a month, I could make 500 Tk. . I stopped my school at 9th grade and took over the leadership of the producers' group, also organised by the WP. Our group learned making Sharis, the local dress.

In 2011, the WP leader organised a visit by two buyers in our group, Merchy & Mister. They were impressed by the quality of Sharis and they made their first order. After few months, we had more and more orders from the buyers because we could supply good quality products. Some groups from our neighbours visited our work to learn from us. Today, our group members earn 3,000 Tk on average per month. I have collected 7,000 Tk for house roof renovation, 10,000 Tk for my sister's marriage, supporting other brothers and sister in their schooling. The WP is a turning point in my life. It is a way to survive and get socially and economically active, together with other community members.



The WPs also played the role of certifying and recommending resource farmers or suitable candidates from the community to become LSPs. The associations of the service providers train and improve their technical and business skills of the LSPs for timely and quality services to the local producers, including poor producers whom government services usually do not reach. The WPs worked closely with the associations of service providers in the selection of LSPs and offered important opportunities to create business niches. The services from the LSPs were accessible and affordable to the poor and extreme poor producers as the service providers are from the same community.

⁶ 1 USD = 77.30 BDT (BDT called Tk. or Taka in Bangladeshi currency) , <http://www.nblbd.com/>

3.2 Women economic empowerment

As mentioned earlier, the potential for women's participation in the value chains compared to men was the highest in cotton crafts, chicken, duck, goat, plant crafts, medicinal plants and vegetable value chains. These pro-poor value chain activities have practical advantages for poor and extreme poor women because of the feasibility of doing the activities closer to women's houses/villages in addition to the low start-up investment costs.⁷ (See Figure-3).

The profitability and employment opportunities of the value chains also depend on the local context and conditions. For example, in Sunamganj region the fish, duck and plant crafts value chains have higher income margin in comparison to goat and medicinal plants value chains. In Bogra region the medicinal plants value chain is more profitable compared to cotton crafts that are prominent in Rangpur area. See Figure 1 for the Map of Samriddhi working areas.

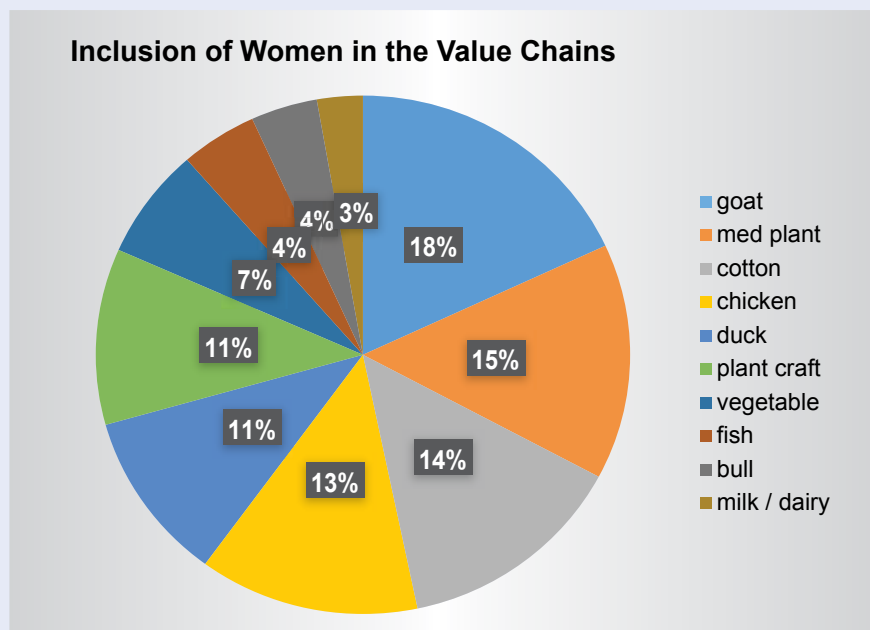


Figure 3: Inclusion of women in the value chains development

The roles and functions of the WPs to empower women in economic activities are different for different value chains. In most cases, the WPs helped women to lobby their interests at public authorities and involved them in income generating activities. The WPs also recommended women to attend various skills trainings and acted as guarantors to obtain loans from financial institutions. Table-1 shows the functions segregated along the different value chains.

⁷ Women inclusion in Jute and Fruit VC below 3%. The source is from Samriddhi MRM Data as of December 2013

Table 1. Roles of WPs along different value chains

Value chains	Functions/Issues	Roles of WPs
Goat, duck, chicken, Milk/dairy	Access to services and training	Sensitisation, linkages, lobbying
Medicinal plants	Access to public land from local government bodies (UPs).	Organising producer groups Approaching local government bodies
Cotton / plant craft	Access to finance from MFI or traders	Coordination with producers; groups for joint purchase of inputs; serving as guarantors

The WPs have successfully involved women in the value chains development. Samriddhi project supported the WPs to involve women in decision-making processes so that they can better address their issues. The project facilitated various sensitisation workshops. The WPs supported women to run their business, arranging trainings, vaccination camps, experience exchange visits and linking with inputs and output market actors. WP representatives attended UP standing committees⁸ and other development committees to defend better the rights and interests of women, and accordingly create conducive enabling environment for the poor and extreme poor to access public land/services /income opportunities from the Union Parishads.



⁸ UP Standing Committee: Each UP in Bangladesh has 13 Standing Committees assigned for specific working area (e.g in DRR, Education, Water and sanitation, Women and children welfare, etc).

Case 2: WP facilitates an access to Public Land for poor women group

The WP organised a group of 21 extreme poor women in Ramchandrapur village of Hossainpur Union of Polashbari Upazilla under Gaibandha District in Rangpur division. These extreme poor women had very low income and were landless. They wanted to be involved in some economic activities by having access to land, but the lack of capital for buying land or presenting a collateral to potential lenders were the main impediments.

WP mobilised the women to claim roadside land from the UP, which has the power to give access to poor and extreme poor people. The WP organised several meetings with the UP together with the group of women to share their concerns. In 2010 the UP allocated 3 kilometres of village roadside to the women group for medicinal herbs plantation. In 2013, the group could harvest leaves every six weeks and sell their produce to ACME, one of the largest pharmaceutical companies.



The success of the WP was noticed and replicated by other WPs and communities. By 2014 the communities had about 800 kilometres of road side for medicinal plant cultivation where around 48,000 producers were engaged with an average monthly income of 1,200 Tk. /producer.

3.3 Horizontal expansion

The field practices showed that the degree of expansion of economic activities (by adopters' number and geographical coverage) depends on the dynamics of a different value chain (VC). As different VC appears with different opportunities and challenges, hence, the role of WP is often not visible and yet significant in empowering the people of the community.

The medicinal plants value chain attracted mostly women groups and the poor in the community. The WPs contributed significantly by lobbying and acquiring public land (roadside) for growing medicinal plants. In other value chains like chicken, duck, goat, vegetables, and plant crafts the role of WPs results in linking with respective service providers (LSP/SPA).

The presence of WPs in the value chains development increased the group solidarity that the producers of MSE were encouraged to work together. They jointly started buying production inputs to save transaction costs, selling their products with stronger bargaining power for better prices and jointly adopting improved technologies for production through local service providers.

As a case in point, WPs were proving to be essential for enhanced coordination of actors (from producers' groups to the UPs, government agencies, LSP/SPAs, etc), for mobilising local resources such as khas land (road-side land for medicinal plants or establishment of collection centres) as well as ensuring the inclusion of poor, extreme poor and women in the various economic activities.

Case 3: Popy Begum in Bull Fattening in Rajshahi

Popy Begum started bull fattening in 2012. She is the member of Gainpara ward platform of Jeopara union under Puthia Upazila of Rajshahi district. Popy Begum says: *"I learned about bull fattening from the president of WP when I was looking for a job. After I saw another woman rearing the bull, I decided also to try it for myself. The WP helped me to obtain a startup loan from BRAC and LSPs provided basic training. Other farmers also shared their knowledge and supported me in sales. After rearing for 5 months, I could sell the bull with the net profit of 10000 Taka"*.

With the next loan, she decided to buy two bulls in order to get better return on investment and develop her own capital for the bull. Her husband also joined the bull fattening and today they have good links to traders and LSPs. Popy Begum has one child. She dreams of educating him in future. All together bull fattening showed her new passage for living. She acknowledges that WP acts as the useful guardian for the poor.



3.4. Disaster risk reduction

In order to mainstream Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) in the planning and sharing process of the communities, the WPs played a vital role in building awareness of the whole community about protecting themselves and their assets from disasters. This role was also related to linking communities to government bodies and other relevant actors for local resource mobilisation, which are highly needed for expensive investments like DRR. The project facilitated to categorize the vulnerability of communities through the WPs by using DRR tool. This helped to identify 613 communities within the wards which were on medium and high risks disaster and further prepare DRR action plans. All of these WPs were able to implement at least one prevention and preparedness measure. Under the leadership of the WPs and with the help of project, disaster risk assessment tools and community-based DRR planning tools were used to identify disaster risks and solutions.

The WPs were able to define both hardware and software measures to overcome disaster risks. The project facilitated designing of specific interventions for high and medium disaster prone areas. Aligned with the ward specific disaster assessments, the WPs under high and medium disaster prone areas chalked out the Annual Disaster Risk Reduction Action plan. The plan incorporated major steps, specific tasks under major steps, timeframe and deadlines and persons in charge against each task, including external and internal resources/support. The WPs were able to link and coordinate with UP and other government line agencies, NGOs and private sector actors to adopt new technologies and services to achieve the action plan targets.

WP representatives are the members of Union Disaster Management Committee (UDMC)⁹ and disaster management of UP level. They lobby and advocate for including their plans in the UP plan and for securing funds for implementation of their plan such as:

- Conducting DRR awareness campaigns
- Mobilising communities to build or repair dams to protect rice from flash floods;
- Adaptation and introduction of new, drought tolerant rice varieties for drought prone areas; early rice varieties for *haor*¹⁰ basin areas (Sunamganj); and preservation of seeds in seed bank at community level;
- *Hatti* protection (a mechanism of protecting village or para against waves during the Monsoon);
- Raising platform /grounds for keeping livestock in safe places during floods;
- Organising vaccination camps before and after the floods;
- Coordinating and facilitating accessing seeds from government line departments after floods and some WPs have also developed “Community Seed Bank”;
- Installation of irrigation and drinking water supply by communicating Borendra Multiple Development Project (BMDP)¹¹
- Promotion of tree plantation as the preparedness/ measure to reduce the risk of disaster

⁹ Union Disaster Management Committee (UDMC) : Mandate given to Union Parishads by the Disaster and Relief Operation Ministry of the Government of Bangladesh, in particular for disaster prone areas.

¹⁰ Haor : is low lying area of vast water bodies usually is formed by seasonal rains & flash flood during the monsoon time but field crops inundated then by water and that water body produces natural fishes.

¹¹ BMDP : It is ongoing project of the GoB working in northern part of Bangladesh to address draught i.e. irrigation facilities for agriculture and drinking water.

WPs have significant social responsibilities in DRR management in most of the wards. These include planning, disaster risk preparedness, negotiations and lobbying for external support that are essential for the livelihoods needs that are expected to continue even after project termination. However, DRR activities are expensive and require good level of technical, financial, and human resources that are not available with most of the WPs.

Case 3: Strengths of WP's network in *haor* area of Sunamganj

Sunamganj is one of the districts of *haor* (water bodies) region of Bangladesh. Boro rice is the only main crop. This district comprises of many *haors*, inundating the region with huge amount of water during the monsoon season. Farmers cultivate boro rice in the region.

Pakhnar haor is one of the biggest in Jamalganj Upazila under Sunamganj district. Total cultivable land area of this *haor* is about 26,000 ha and about 6,000 people of the 29 villages directly depend on this cultivation. Usually during monsoon *Pakhnar haor* fills up with water (from rain and *Surma* River). After monsoon, water drains out through *kanaikhali* canal. But repeated siltation of the *Kanai Khali* canal for the last 15 years created water logging affecting about 19,000 ha (out of 26,000 ha) of land uncultivable every year.



To address recurrent problems caused by siltation and early flash flood every year, WP representatives jointly built an embankment. During 2010-2012, the Fenarbak union WP Network (composed of 9 WPs) developed a joint plan and kept the issue as a number one priority for establishing embankment to protect rice cultivation. The WP Network discussed this issue with three UPs, civil societies, Chairman of Upazilla Parishad, Water Development Board (WDB) and other stakeholders. Accordingly, in 2011-2012, the WP Network facilitated the building of 10km embankment to protect water entering from *Surma* River. As a result, about 73,394 Mt of Boro rice annually were being produced now on 20,800 ha of land.

Earlier, people thought disaster is made by the God and that communities had to accept this fate. The role of the WP in mobilising communities and engaging important stakeholder showed that it is possible to contributing in tackling natural disasters.

3.5 Lobbying and advocacy

The Samriddhi project facilitated the human and institutional capacity building of the WPs and improved the leadership, negotiation and advocacy skills of the leaders to secure access to a more enabling environment. The project, working with civil society groups and trainers, facilitated capacity building training of the 4,029 WP leaders on leadership, negotiation and advocacy.

Most cases, WP committees include UP ward members, either in the Executive Committee or as an advisor to strengthen the capacity of lobbying and advocacy with the local government (UPs). WPs prepared Annual Plan of Operation (APOs) where they identified needs, prioritised those and placed demands to the UPs (see table 2). In fact, the UPs have their own mandates to serve people. The WPs used this as entry to include their priorities in the plan and budget. By attending regular meetings, WP representatives participate and lobby to include their priorities. WPs increased their understanding of the internal working mechanism of UPs, including services, budget allocations and people's rights to access these services. UPs also valued the importance of WPs in influencing local communities' perception and hence servicing as a crucial source of votes for elected officials.

Table 2. Synergies between Ward Platforms and Union Parishads

Matching areas	WPs' role	UPs' role	Who will continue after Samriddhi
Representation from Wards in UPs' standing Committees	Able to raise voice /priorities being as committee members	Able to perform mandates through inclusion of WP representatives in UPs' committee	High likelihood that UPs' will continue in future
UPs' Annual Plan and Budget	Lobby to incorporate needs/ priorities in annual plan and budget allocation to implement	UPs' thus become transparent and accountable to people, get people's support to implement their plan of action and monitoring of progress	Likely UPs will continue. But this depends on UPs' capacity, and responsiveness to people
Access of poor & extreme poor to safety net benefits	WPs better identify vulnerable people and work on their behalf	UPs' allocate safety net benefits to eligible people by responding recommendations from WPs	Pro-poor WP leaders mainly those with good capacities and proactive leaders will likely continue to lobby

The WPs improved their skills and abilities to identify stakeholders and forge functional relationships with other development partners. In this context, they have good collaboration with UPs, Union Disaster Management Committee (UDMC), government line agencies, and various NGOs. Out of total 1899 WPs, 91% and 74% of the WPs respectively, developed and implemented their APOs independently. 23% of the WPs' development projects were integrated into the development plans of UPs.

4. The Way Forward

The Samriddhi experience showed that the Ward Platforms were effective in bringing communities together and protecting the rights and interests of producers, particularly, the poor and extreme poor. The WPs created an enabling environment for the communities and empowered them to raise their social and economic concerns during the Platform events.

Moreover, the experiences showed the necessity of socially responsible organisations like the Ward Platforms in rural areas which are sustained through clearly set incentives and shared benefits. Did the Ward Platforms have sufficient incentives and capacities to function? Did they have a clear vision and value proposition to maintain themselves? If not Ward Platforms would be there in the future, how can development work manage an integration of the social needs of producers into commercial activities? The answers to these questions are given in the recommendations below based on the lessons drawn from the Samriddhi experience.



4.1 Integration of the social capital into market development is a key to success

Over time, the Ward Platforms became socially responsible entities promoting economic development and addressing social needs of people and local communities. The development of social capital emerged as a precondition for the strengthening of other sustainable livelihoods capitals such as the economic capital, and the human, the physical, the natural and the political capital. Access to resources and services significantly improved, as most of the Ward Platforms were capable of taking initiatives involving a wide range of local development partners. **The more mature a WP became, the easier it was to sustain this social capital through mutually trusting members.**

The Ward Platforms promoted income generating activities or developed markets, empowered women / women groups for economic activities and took preventive measures against natural disasters. These activities not only brought rural poor people together but also improved their livelihoods. **So, without an enhanced social capital, economic empowerment for rural poor people is indeed a challenge to attain.**

Collective actions of value chain actors like joint purchase of inputs, joint sales and ensuring volumes contributed to horizontal expansion of the economic activities among producers. The social capital is difficult to measure but can be observed in the continuous relationships and commitment among the groups in the Ward Platforms when they are acting jointly and benefiting on equal shares.

4.2 Strengthening advocacy for better environment

Facilitating the human and institutional capacity building of the Ward Platforms by Samriddhi improved the leadership, negotiation and advocacy skills of WP to secure access to the more enabling environment for sustainable and economic growth. Close collaboration with the Union Parishads allowed the Ward Platforms to get access to UP services for the community at local level.

The capacity building in disaster risk reduction allowed the Ward Platforms to develop “Annual Disaster Risk Reduction Plans” and address disaster risk reduction (DRR) issues in most of the medium & high risk rated Wards. **For disaster prone areas, the mainstreaming of DRR becomes part of integrating social and economic livelihood improvement.** In addition to DRR, development approaches shall deliberately focus on Climate Change Effect (CCE) while promoting social and economic livelihood improvement and value chain development. The producers are encountering more and more climate change effects in their production that differ per region, season and natural circumstances and practices. **Strengthening the capacity of the community organisations like the Ward Platforms is an effective vehicle to enhance community awareness and social mobilisation.**

The role of Ward Platforms in economic activities became more important in comparison to social activities when Platform leaders assumed leadership of the MSEs and business development. Driven by economic incentives WP and MSE leaders paid less attention to social needs of the community. On the other hand, communities were not able to raise their voice and address their social needs as the social role of the Ward Platforms could not be incentivised properly and eventually lost its importance. For this reason, as alternative option for future, **external interventions shall foster a clear vision to build capacities of the local communities in a way that people are strong enough to choose their leaders and develop power in unity to solve their social needs** when they are not addressed.

4.3 Enhancing women participation as drivers of the social capital

The Ward Platform has played a vital role to promote gender equality focusing on women empowerment. Samriddhi has built on its extensive experience in tackling social barriers as prerequisite to Women’s Economic Empowerment (WEE). The experiences prove that pro-women value chains have significantly improved the social status of women as well as contributed to increase their family income. WP members have also taken the lead role in the formation of MSE in which poor and extreme poor women involvement has been strengthened. However, there are still vast opportunities that could be better tapped with involvement of women. Glaring gender inequalities in economic opportunities require a more focused analysis of barriers to economic empowerment and adaption of approaches (e.g., tools, strategies) for both, practical and strategic gender needs.

With the assistance of WP, overall participation of women in decision-making processes has increased at community level. But in particular for poor and extreme poor women participation in decision-making did not change as expected.

4.4 Ensuring equal shares and benefits for all involved through mutual collaboration

This study describes how WP contributed in many ways to improve rural livelihoods and to ensure equal shares and benefits for all. Establishing smooth collaboration between Ward Platforms and Union Parishads resulted in benefiting from social allowances and involvement in income generating activities related to public works. WPs were also instrumental in forming and organising local producer groups (MSEs) so that local service providers (LSP) and local traders could reduce transaction costs and increase their client base. Through the involvement of WPs in selecting LSPs and the membership of the Service Provider Associations (SPA), the local potential in terms of skills, willingness and acceptance of such service providers could be easily harnessed.

Through the mutual collaboration with various stakeholders, the Ward Platforms became more useful and functional as a social entity. A strong cohesiveness and feeling of solidarity became visible among the members within the Platform and outside. For this reason, strong Ward Platforms with committed leadership and a clear vision can contribute significantly to build equal shares and benefits for its members and partners.



About the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) is Switzerland's international cooperation agency within the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. The Swiss development cooperation gives priority to poverty reduction. Globally, SDC endeavours to foster economic self-reliance and state autonomy, contribute to the improvement of production conditions, help in finding solutions to environmental problems, and provide better access to education and basic healthcare services in partner countries.

SDC in Bangladesh:

SDC has been working in Bangladesh since the latter's independence. SDC considers Bangladesh as one of its priority countries in regards to long-term development cooperation efforts.

The overall goal of the Swiss development cooperation in Bangladesh is to contribute to the improvement of wellbeing for the poor and disadvantaged people in Bangladesh. In particular, the Swiss Cooperation Strategy for Bangladesh (2013-2017) emphasises increasing poor peoples' employment and income and strengthening public services and citizens' voice and participation.

SDC Bangladesh seeks to contribute to systemic change through facilitation, capacity building, advocacy and policy dialogue in the fields of Market Development, Skills Development and Local Governance. Outcomes in the three portfolios will focus on (1) citizens' use of improved services, (2) the provision of improved and inclusive services by public and private sector players, and (3) the improvement of the enabling environment.

About HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation

HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation is a member-based, non-profit association. It emerged in 2011 as a result of the merger of Intercooperation, Swiss Foundation for Development and International Cooperation, and HELVETAS, Swiss Association for International Cooperation.

HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation is present in more than 30 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Central Asia and Eastern Europe. Its vision is a just and peaceful world in which all human beings live in a self-determined way in dignity and safety, are able to satisfy their basic needs, have access to resources and services which are indispensable for life, and take care of the environment.

Thematic working areas of HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation are:

- ☐ ■ Water & Infrastructure
- ☐ ■ Rural Economy
- ☐ ■ Skills Development & Education
- ☐ ■ Governance & Peace
- ☐ ■ Environment & Climate Change

In Bangladesh, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation Bangladesh started working in 2000 at the request of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation to manage its Sustainable Land Use Programme. Since then, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation's portfolio has grown to include local governance, livelihoods and market systems development, as well as drinking water and natural resource management projects.

Samridhi

enhancing rural prosperity through
market systems development in Bangladesh

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